

THE TRINITY AND THE NEW TESTAMENT – A COUNTER-CHALLENGE TO DALE TUGGY

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Abstract. Dale Tuggy argues that my trinitarian views are in conflict with the theology of the New Testament; the New Testament, rather, is unitarian. I show several flaws in this argument, and point out the New Testament evidence that eventually led to the formulation of the doctrine of the Trinity.

I. INTRODUCTION

Dale Tuggy and I do not agree about the Trinity. That much, I suppose, will not be a surprise to the reader. Just because of that, however, there is some point in beginning this reply with an accounting of some things on which we are in agreement, thus providing a background against which to view our differences. First, both of us seek to be followers of Jesus Christ, in our personal lives as well as in our scholarly work. This means that we each understand ourselves to have a personal stake in what is at issue in our discussion. Second, both of us are convinced of the importance of rightly answering the question about who Jesus really is, a question that is central to the doctrine of the Trinity. Third, both of us belong to Christian traditions stemming from the Protestant Reformation, and as such we agree that the scriptures of the New Testament are the central source for answering the question about Jesus. And finally, both of us are analytic philosophers. This fact implies some things about our approach to theological questions, such as the question of the doctrine of the Trinity. Analytic philosophers place a high value on clarity, and on the explicit statement of ideas, including and especially religious ideas. We acknowledge the importance of logic, and of the logical analysis of statements; this means we have considerable common ground in the methodology with which we approach trinitarian doctrine. We may often be found to be disagreeing, but rarely, it is to be hoped, will we simply be talking past one another.

Now I will point out some ways in which we disagree about how we approach the doctrine of the Trinity. I will do this by stating two general objections that I have to Tuggy's approach to these questions. I find that he relies on problematic definitions, and puts forward distorted historical narratives. First, the definitions: In any discussion in philosophy or theology the definitions of key terms are of crucial importance. There are, however, at least two areas where confusion may arise. First of all, the term may be understood by some readers with a definition different than the one you have given. This is troublesome, because when the term is used the reader may have in mind the other definition, thus confusing the message that is being conveyed. Another problem is that one's interlocutor may have specific reasons for rejecting a definition that seems, on the face of it, to be reasonable. In that case, appealing to the definition may amount to begging the question, and arguments employing the definition will be ineffective.

The other main problem lies in distorted historical narratives: To some extent, movements of thought are artefacts of historians. These movements are identified by pointing out causal connections between the work of various thinkers, and while sometimes these connections are obvious, at other times they may be obscure and debatable. Furthermore, the distinctive characteristics of a movement may become apparent only gradually; if so, how does one decide when the movement commenced? Or a movement

may gradually fade out, raising questions about the time of its disappearance. In answering those questions, what is called for is a sense of historical development, a sense which enables one to see which thinkers naturally and properly “go together” with which other thinkers, and when, in other cases, resemblances are superficial and fail to signal any real affinity. In questions of this sort, there often is no single, clearly correct, answer. But sometimes it becomes clear that history is not being “divided at the joints”; when this happens, the historical narrative becomes distorted, so that the movements thus picked out fail to correspond with actual historical processes. It should be evident, furthermore, that tendentious definitions and distorted processes readily go together: if the definition of a key term is wrong, it may fail to pick out genuine historical connections.

So far, I have not given any evidence that Tuggy is guilty of any of these faults; I have simply explained the problems, so as to have the categories on hand for future reference.

II. TWO NARRATIVES

Tuggy begins by characterizing my approach to the Trinity in a way that I need to challenge. He states, correctly, that “Hasker has thus far placed a high level of trust in patristic tradition, that they got biblical interpretation and trinitarian theology *basically* correct” (154).¹ He concludes “Thus far, it seems to me that Hasker, in his zeal for metaphysics, has neglected the New Testament, preferring to start his theorizing with the late 4th century ‘fathers’” (154). Not so. It is true that my exposition in *Metaphysics and the Tri-Personal God*² begins with the fourth and fifth century Fathers, but this is a consequence of the purpose of the book, as well as the audience for whom it was primarily written. In writing I had in mind mainly fellow trinitarians who are concerned to arrive at the best formulation of the doctrine; also, to be sure, non-trinitarians such as Tuggy who are interested in recent developments. What I did not intend to do is to build a case for the Trinity “from the ground up” — but that, in effect, is what Tuggy is now challenging me to do. In responding, I shall need to address topics that were treated in the book only in passing, or not at all. Especially, of course, the basis for the doctrine in the New Testament. I do not think it is strictly correct to claim, as some do, that the doctrine of the Trinity is found in the New Testament. Even a cursory review of the complex history of the Christian understanding of God in the second through the fifth centuries should give one pause about claiming that all of these considerations were already anticipated, even implicitly, by the biblical writers in the first century.

The story of the doctrine does, however, begin with the scriptures of the New Testament. Those scriptures are our record of the way in which Christianity began, and of the enormous impact on the disciples of the life, teachings, miracles, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, as well as his subsequent presence in the Church through the work of the Holy Spirit. In consequence of this impact, the disciples began early on to celebrate him with statements that would be virtually unimaginable if used to describe an ordinary human being. He was said not merely to be the Jewish Messiah, but to have existed along with the Father in ages past, and to have been a principal agent in the creation of the universe. Very soon there developed practices of what has come to be called “binitarian worship” — worship of Jesus along with God the Father, and in the same way that God was worshiped. Hymns were sung to Jesus, and prayers made to him. Not frequently, but in a few crucial texts, Jesus is referred to as “God” (*theos*).

This panoply of descriptors provided rich resources for worship, but also posed an intellectual challenge: who exactly is this person, Jesus? Working out the answer to the challenge was a task for the next several centuries, and the historical result was our doctrines of Trinity and Incarnation. In the process, various philosophical conceptions then available were tried out, modified and adapted, or sometimes discarded, in the effort to rightly and coherently express the Church’s faith in Jesus. The process was decidedly imperfect, but the result, I believe, can be viewed as the fulfillment of the promise of Jesus that his

1 Dale Tuggy, “Hasker’s Tri-Personal God vs. New Testameent Theology”, *European Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 13, no. 1 (2021). Page numbers in the text refer to this article.

2 William Hasker, *Metaphysics and the Tri-Personal God* (Oxford Univ. Press, 2013).

Spirit would guide his disciples into the truth concerning him. And this, in skeletal form, is my narrative of the development of trinitarian doctrine. Filling out the details of the narrative is a task for specialists in biblical theology and the history of doctrine; some of those details will come up from time to time in our further discussion.

Dale Tuggy's account of this history is much different. For him, the metaphysical question, "who Jesus was," was not a problem that the early Christian church needed to confront, or did confront. There was, and is, no metaphysical problem about Jesus Christ, though there is a great deal to be said about the importance of his life and work for us. Unfortunately, however, some of the seemingly extravagant depictions of Jesus by the New Testament writers began to be taken over-literally, and beginning sometime in the second century metaphysical speculation about Jesus began to gain a foothold. However, virtually all of this early thought concerning Jesus remained "unitarian," in that the one God of Israel was identified with God the Father and was seen as being clearly distinct from Jesus. It is only late in the fourth century that we see a theology that is trinitarian — a theology that, enforced by imperial patronage, gained a privileged status in the Church that remains until this day. In this not unimportant respect, the endeavor of the Holy Spirit to lead the disciples to the truth ended in failure.

These two historical narratives go far towards capturing the overall opposition between Tuggy's view concerning the Trinity and my own. From the standpoint of either of the two narratives, the other narrative will be viewed as distorted, in the sense described above. If the reader embraces Tuggy's version, then the history of trinitarian thought will be seen primarily as a huge, and unfortunately long-lasting, diversion from the issues that more properly should concern Christian thinkers. For those who accept my version, or something close to it, the Trinity remains a vital concern for theology, one whose revival in recent times can only be a cause for celebration. Much in theology — indeed, nearly everything — depends on this decision.

Now I will point out how problematic definitions are used to support Tuggy's narrative. An important question is how best to understand 'unitarian,' as that term is applied to the ancient world. The term was introduced as a descriptor for the Socinians in the Reformation period. It designated them as Christians who worshipped a single God, and regarded Jesus as ontologically a human being and nothing more, albeit one empowered and used by God in remarkable ways. This same description applies to most of those who, in the period since then, have used 'unitarian' as a self-description (including Tuggy and his fellow "biblical unitarians"); although there have been exceptions to this. I believe that, if we are going to use the term to apply to the early Christian centuries, we should stick to the original definition. Tuggy, however, says "As I define it, a 'unitarian' Christian theology identifies the one God with the Father but is neutral about the exact status of God's Son and spirit" (2, fn 9). This enables him to count as unitarians Tertullian and Origen, both important theologians who made major contributions to mainstream Christian theology, even though for them the Logos was a "lesser divine person." (A more common label for belief-systems such as theirs is "subordinationist.") Origen, however, was strongly opposed to the "dynamic monarchians" who held views similar to those of most modern unitarians, so branding both of them "unitarian" has the effect of combining under a single label views that historically were strongly opposed. If in contrast one limits unitarians to those who, like Tuggy, hold to a "human-only" Jesus, one finds in the ancient Church only isolated, scattered examples, none of whom achieved much traction or had a substantial impact on later developments. The problematic definition arguably allows Tuggy to assign to "unitarianism" a far more important role in ancient Christianity than it actually had.

An even more interesting case is presented by Tuggy's handling of the term 'trinitarian.' According to him, a trinitarian must be one who affirms both the distinction of Father, Son, and Spirit and also their full, absolute, ontological equality. Furthermore, a trinitarian must identify the one God with the Trinity as a whole. Now, this might be a reasonable requirement for a *fully developed* trinitarian theology. But by the same token, the requirement has the effect of cutting off such a developed trinitarianism from its antecedents, making it appear as a late (and in Tuggy's view, unwelcome) innovation. This definition implies that there were no trinitarians until nearly the end of the fourth century: the creed of the council of Nicaea is not trinitarian, and even Athanasius, who in all standard accounts was the champion of

trinitarian orthodoxy against Arianism, may not qualify as a trinitarian! More recently Tuggy relents a little on this; he suggests that, in a late writing, Athanasius may just sneak under the wire!³ But just as his problematic definition of ‘unitarian’ allows him to magnify the importance of “unitarians” in the ancient Church, his definition of ‘trinitarian’ allows him to present the Trinity as a late-developing aberration. By way of contrast, patristic scholar J. N. D. Kelly, in a highly respected survey of the theology of the early Christian centuries, devotes an entire chapter to “Third-Century Trinitarianism.”⁴

To be fair, Tuggy has a principled reason for this restrictive definition. For him, the defining feature of trinitarianism is that ‘Trinity’ (Gr. *trias*, Latin *trinitas*) is treated as a singular referring term, and the Trinity is identified with the one God. The transition to this usage came about during the 370s and 380s; he finds it in Gregory of Nyssa and Gregory of Nazianzus, but not in Basil, and he argues that it is pre-supposed, though not expressed, in the creed of the council of Constantinople, our “Nicene Creed.” A good many historians (following what Tuggy calls the “catholic narrative”) have read this interpretation back into earlier theologians, but Tuggy cites mainstream scholars (notably, G. L. Prestige) in support of his contention that, for those earlier thinkers, *trias* and *trinitas* were collective referring expressions and were not taken to designate the “one God” whom Christians worship; the one God was, rather, the Father.

This new usage for ‘Trinity,’ arising in the late fourth century, and along with it the understanding of the Trinity as the one God, is a significant development, but it is another question whether it deserves to be considered as the Rubicon whose crossing marked the beginning of trinitarianism properly so called. One might rather think that this change, though not unimportant, represented a natural next step in the development of doctrine. Once it was firmly established that the Son and the Spirit were equal, ontologically, with the Father, it became questionable to identify the Father alone as the one God. So the new usage was adopted, apparently with little emphasis or fanfare.⁵ If the change had the importance Tuggy attributes to it, it is quite surprising that the council’s creed makes no mention of it. Perhaps, as he suggests, it was left out in order to avoid arousing opposition at the council, as seems to have been the case with the assertion that the Spirit is *homoousios*. (This is an addition which was urged by Gregory Nazianzen but was not incorporated in the creed, though the creed can reasonably be seen as implying it.) If so, however, that underscores the impression that the new usage, and with it the understanding that God = the Trinity, was not perceived as a fundamental line of demarcation, but rather as a somewhat incidental matter that could be left to take care of itself. It is noteworthy that a highly respected scholar like Prestige, cited by Tuggy as supporting his contention that such a change had occurred, nevertheless had no qualms in speaking of “third-century trinitarianism.” Making this change the beginning of trinitarianism properly so-called seems to be an innovation of Tuggy’s, and one that distorts rather than clarifies the historical narrative.

But the most overtly polemical case of Tuggy’s problematic definitions lies elsewhere. Tuggy notes that I understand the trinitarian assertion that each person “is God” as attributing a property to each person. This is the property of “being divine, that is, of having all the divine attributes, such as omnipotence, omniscience, being uncreated, and being eternal” (155-156). He goes on, “I take it that these attributes, taken all together, are a kind-essence—that in virtue of which their owner is a reality of a certain kind. What is the kind here? It would seem: god” (156). From this he concludes that, on my view, each of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit should be a god, so that together there are three gods, which is inconsistent with monotheism. He does note that “Hasker tries to head off this sort of objection with a gag-order: we must not say that ‘the Father is a God’ or ‘that the Son is a God.’ But why, if each has all that it takes to be a god? It is an analytic truth that something is a god if and only if it has the divine essence” (157). This is wide of the mark: there is no gag-order. A gag-order is issued only to prevent someone from saying

3 In an e-mail dated August 17, 2020.

4 J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines* (Adam and Charles Black, 1958), 109–37.

5 Tuggy states, “On the face of it, it is surprising that mainstream Christian tradition changed from thinking that the one God is the Father alone to the sort of view where the one God is the Trinity. Such a change is so surprising that many wish to deny that it happened. But it did happen, and in a relatively short period of time” (Dale Tuggy, “When and How in the History of Theology Did the Triune God Replace the Father as the Only True God?,” *TheoLogica* 4, no. 2 (2020), 19).

something they might otherwise have wanted to say. But a Christian theologian has every reason *not* to say that each divine person “is a god”; indeed, the expression “a god” is itself a dubious one that is generally best avoided.⁶ To speak of Yahweh as “a god” strongly suggests, though it does not entail, that there are other gods besides, which is not a view the biblical writers wished to encourage. True, the pagan deities are referred to as “gods” (as are, on occasion human rulers), but these are entities, even taken at face value as described, that do *not* possess the divine essence as defined above. And of course, there is the appearance of tritheism if each trinitarian person is said to be “a god.” So why is it puzzling if a Christian theologian declines to use an expression that is incompatible with the entire Christian theological scheme, and can only cause conflicts if inserted into that scheme? But Tuggy, whose theology is opposed to trinitarianism, is free to speak of “gods” however he pleases.

Tuggy will ask, however, what is the “kind” represented by the divine kind-essence, if it is not “a god”? A straightforward answer is available: to have the divine essence is to be a divine person — *not* to be “a god.” Tuggy, of course, will not accept this. But if he refuses, he is making the trinitarian’s point: Tuggy’s concept of the divine essence is simply *not the same concept* as the trinitarian’s concept of that essence. And for Tuggy to insist on his own definition, so that “It is an analytic truth that something is a god if and only if it has the divine essence,” is question-begging pure and simple.⁷ Tuggy can say whatever he likes; trinitarians can refuse to accept his assertions and can find his arguments to be without weight. That’s exactly the opposite of a gag-order!

Thus far, I have presented my case that Tuggy relies on problematic definitions and presents a distorted historical narrative. But the challenge of his title concerns biblical theology, so it is to the interpretation of scripture that we must now turn.

III. WHAT SAY THE SCRIPTURES?

Our examination of Tuggy’s argument must begin by seeing how he sets up the question. He asks, did the writers of the New Testament hold to a trinitarian or to a unitarian view of God? ‘Trinitarian’ is understood as noted above: a trinitarian holds that the one God is the Trinity; a unitarian, in contrast, holds that the one God is the Father. Tuggy goes on to cite “five indisputable facts about the New Testament writings, each of which would be very surprising if these authors thought that the one God is the Trinity, but none of which would be surprising if these authors think the one God is the Father alone” (161). Each of these facts, Tuggy admits, is logically consistent with the thesis that the NT authors were trinitarians; nevertheless, taken together they constitute a strong case that those authors were in fact unitarians. Indeed, they constitute a *conclusive* case: the heading for this section is “How we can *know* that the authors of the New Testament held to a unitarian view of God” (8, emphasis added).

There are multiple problems with this formulation of the question. As the reader will recognize, I object to the definitions of both ‘trinitarian’ and ‘unitarian.’ These definitions have the consequence that too few theologians will qualify as trinitarians, and far too many will qualify as unitarians. If we were to view the fourth-century controversies over the Trinity in the light of these definitions, a very strange picture would emerge. On the “trinitarian” side, we have the two Gregories and the late Athanasius, together with the creed of Constantinople 381, our “Nicene Creed.” On the opposite side of the controversy, we have Basil, Arius, Eunomius, the early Athanasius, and the creed of the council of Nicaea, all of which qualify as “unitarian”! Clearly, this picture bears no relation to what was actually going on in the fourth century. In fairness, Tuggy does not claim that his terms track the controversy that occurred then. But the fact that

⁶ There is to be sure the expression, “There is a God.” This is a protest against atheism; to be acceptable, it must be understood as implying that there is *exactly one* God.

⁷ Previously I had thought Tuggy’s definition of ‘monotheism’ made it impossible for a trinitarian to be a monotheist. Now I realize that this is not the case; monotheism is simply the belief in one and only one God, and a trinitarian who holds that the one God is the Trinity will qualify. The problem, rather, is whether the trinitarian can consistently avoid saying that there is more than one God.

these definitions signally fail to correspond to the patterns of controversy that actually occurred strongly suggests that the definitions are historically inappropriate.

A further objection to this formulation of the question is that I do not espouse, and have never espoused, the thesis that the NT writers were “trinitarians” in Tuggy’s sense (and I believe Tuggy is aware of this). In a footnote, Tuggy mentioned a view, which he has discussed elsewhere, that is at least closer to mine: that those writers are “confused—i.e. in light of ‘the Christ event’ they’re sort of trying to feel their way towards Nicene orthodoxy” (8, fn 45).⁸ He assures us, however, that “the argument works just about as well” if it is this view that is compared with the view that the authors were unitarians. So here is the situation: in a paper ostensibly devoted to a critique of my view on the Trinity, the main position attacked is not mine. Instead, the reader is referred elsewhere for the argument against a view that at least somewhat resembles mine; we are then asked to take Tuggy’s word for it that this other argument is successful!

By this time the reader will not be surprised if I am uninterested in pursuing further the question Tuggy has posed. Nevertheless there is evidence, in the text of the New Testament, which needs to be considered. In view of this, I need to say how I pose the question that needs to be answered here. I propose the following formulation:

Is the evidence of the inspired New Testament writings more supportive of the view that God is unitarian (in the sense Tuggy and other unitarians believe he is, with a “human-only” view of Jesus), or of the orthodox Christian trinitarian view, as expressed in the creeds of Constantinople 381 and Chalcedon?

This formulation puts the issue as a binary choice between the positions that Tuggy and I actually hold. It does not, however, consider exhaustively all of the possible candidates; there are views — roughly, “subordinationist” views — that neither Tuggy nor I support, though they were important contenders in the early centuries. It is this question which I propose to consider in the light of the evidence.

So, how does the evidence bear on the choice between these two views? First, consider the “five facts” that Tuggy adduces as evidence for (what he terms) “unitarianism.” Those facts, in Tuggy’s brief summaries, are as follows:

1. In the New Testament, the word “God” nearly always refers to the Father.
2. No New Testament word or phrase was then understood to refer to the Trinity.
3. All four gospels feature a “mere man” compatible main thesis—that is, a thesis which one can accept while believing that Jesus is human and not divine. This is the thesis that Jesus is God’s Messiah/Christ.
4. The New Testament writings without embarrassment or explanation present Jesus as both limited and dependent on God.
5. In the New Testament only the Father and the man Jesus are worshiped, the latter to the glory of the former (167).

Of these “five facts,” the last three are neutral as between Tuggy’s unitarianism and orthodox trinitarianism. These facts were well known to those who formulated the orthodox doctrines of Trinity and Incarnation, and are in effect incorporated into those doctrines, so they cannot be appealed to as evidence against the doctrines. The first two, on the other hand, would indeed be surprising on the assumption that the New Testament writers held to a developed trinitarian theology, as in Tuggy’s original framing of the issue. They are not, however, surprising if we take a more realistic approach to the historical development of trinitarian belief. But in order to make that case, I need to say more about what such a realistic approach would look like.

⁸ See Dale Tuggy, “The Unfinished Business of the Reformation”, in *Herausforderungen und Modifikationen des klassischen Theismus: Band 1 — Trinität*, ed. Thomas Marschler and Thomas Schärfl (Aschendorff Verlag, 2019). I should state that I do not in fact endorse “option C” as presented in that article, but it is somewhat closer to my view than the other two options discussed.

We can approach this indirectly by posing the following question: Supposing that God is in fact a Trinity, how would Tuggy think God would have revealed this? We might picture something like this: God brings Peter, Paul, and John together in a quiet room, and spells out for them the essentials of trinitarian doctrine. Perhaps God uses a disembodied voice, or maybe an angel is called upon to do duty. The details don't matter; what is essential is that the apostles understand what has been revealed to them, and go forth to incorporate the new insights into their public ministries — including, eventually, their authorship of portions of the New Testament.⁹

Of course, nothing like this actually happened. Anyone familiar with the history of theology in the twentieth century will recall the widespread opposition to “propositional revelation.” This opposition was no doubt carried too far, but it represented a general rejection of an understanding of revelation similar to what is found in our little story: God communicates to his messengers the propositions that are constitutive of the true theology, and they take it from there. What seems to be closer to the truth is to say that God *acts* in a way that is both redemptive and revelatory; God's messengers come to understand the significance of those acts and, guided by the Spirit's inspiration, speak of them to their followers. When Peter uttered the fateful words, “You are the Messiah,” he was not parroting back something Jesus had already said to him. Rather, this was Peter's own insight: revealed to him by the Father, but almost certainly not in so many words. It seems that Jesus' own preferred self-designation, “son of man,” was deliberately inexplicit: it had biblical echoes, but did not in itself convey to his hearers a particular doctrine concerning his role. The disciples were able to observe what he did and taught, and what he was when together with them; it was through meditating on these facts that they were to come to a deeper understanding concerning him, as seen in Peter's affirmation.

This scenario for Peter's recognition of Jesus' messiahship can be extended, *mutatis mutandis*, to apply to the doctrine of God's triune nature. For the Trinity, to be sure, there was not a pre-existing “template” ready to be applied, and the issues involved are inherently more complex than those concerning messiahship (though the latter are far from simple). But the idea that a relatively clear recognition of the truth emerged over a period of time, through reflection on the immediate facts of divine revelatory activity, applies in both cases. This, I would claim, is clearly more consonant with the pattern of divine revelation elsewhere, than the simplistic model presupposed by Tuggy. I would not say, as Tuggy does in portraying such a view, that the early Christians were “confused” and “sort of trying to feel their way towards Nicene orthodoxy.” I would rather say that they were in the early stages of a dynamic process of intellectual and spiritual discovery — one that reached important milestones (though not a stopping point) in the councils at Nicaea, Constantinople, and Chalcedon. In the light of this understanding, Tuggy's first “fact” — that in the New Testament “God” ordinarily refers to the Father — is not very surprising at all; certainly it does not constitute strong evidence in favor of a unitarian reading of the text. This fact, after all, represents very much the *status quo ante*; to use “God” in this way, and for the most part *only* in this way, represented the result of many hundreds of years of hard education in the truth of monotheism. To have readily abandoned this so as to designate as “gods” all sorts of lesser beings — even mere humans — would have amounted to the surrender of the most central difference between God's chosen people and the nations among whom they lived. Many generations of trinitarians have seen as the crucial point not that Jesus is only infrequently termed “God,” but that he is so described at all. This observation leads to a point that by now is obvious: Tuggy's “five facts” do not include the biblical facts that trinitarians have seen as powerful evidence supporting their view. He does not, to be sure, ignore these facts completely; instead he must interpret them in a way consistent with his unitarianism.

Tuggy spends a good deal of space contesting the idea that the fact that Jesus is worshipped shows that he was regarded as divine (163–167). On the whole, these comments presuppose, rather than establish, a human-only view of Jesus, but he does make some headway in showing that the worship of Jesus

⁹ Actually, Tuggy's view is that, if God were the Trinity, God would of necessity have communicated this to the Jewish people *before* the coming of Jesus; otherwise, God would be guilty of deceiving them. See Dale Tuggy, “Divine deception, identity, and Social Trinitarianism”, *Religious Studies* 40, no. 3 (2004).

does not by itself demonstrate that Jesus is himself divine. He also devotes considerable attention to my account of “The Grammar of the Trinity,”¹⁰ pointing to differences between the way I say we should speak about the Trinity and the language of the New Testament. One might question the relevance of this: I explicitly say that my description of the “grammar” presupposes the doctrine of the Trinity as I have developed it, which I do not claim to be present as such in the New Testament.

With regard to the texts in which Jesus is referred to as “God,” Tuggy tells us that “it is sufficient to remember that in these books no less than Jesus himself makes the point that beings who are less great than God can be referred to using forms of the word ‘God’” (171-172). A reference is given to John 10:35–36: “If those to whom the word of God came were called ‘gods’ — and the scripture cannot be annulled — can you say that the one whom the Father has sanctified and sent into the world is blaspheming because I said, ‘I am God’s Son?’” Here Jesus uses a biblical argument to force his opponents to admit that his claiming to be God’s Son is not, in itself, proof of blasphemy. (Jesus was a tough debater!) But this by no means establishes that the significance of Jesus’ own claim went no further than those Old Testament passages in which human beings are addressed as “gods.” As for the significance of Jesus’ claim, see John 5:18, where Jesus was seen by the Jews to be “calling God his own Father, *thereby making himself equal to God.*”

This, however, is an account of the way Jesus was understood by his enemies, so we might wonder whether their understanding of him was correct. If the gospel author were a human-only unitarian, as Tuggy thinks he was, we might have expected him to add here an angry rebuttal: the hostility of the Jews toward Jesus was based on a wholly erroneous understanding of his teaching! But this is not what we find. True, the very next verse quotes Jesus as saying, “the Son can do nothing on his own, but only what he sees the Father doing.” Here as throughout this Gospel, the Son is obedient to the Father and is carrying out the Father’s wishes; he is not setting himself up as an independent authority. But he goes on, “*whatever the Father does, the Son does likewise.*” This is rather astonishing, if one thinks about it. The Son *has the capability* to perform whatever acts are performed by the Father; indeed, the Son *actually does* perform those same acts. Does the Father, as the Creator, maintain the world in existence from moment to moment? Then so does the Son do exactly that! (See Col. 1:17; Heb. 1:3.) Is the Father the “Judge of all the earth”? Then so does the Son perform this role — indeed, it is the Son who does the “detail work” of judging, which has been delegated to him by the Father (v.22). So the Son has the task of arriving at a final, comprehensive evaluation of each of the untold billions of human beings who live, or have lived, or will live on the face of the earth. A task, one would think, very far beyond the capability of any “merely human” mind, brain, and nervous system! The Jesus who is, ontologically, human and nothing more, does not fit into this picture.

Here I will cite just two more New Testament passages that demonstrate the difficulties for Tuggy’s unitarian exegesis. The first is Philippians 2:5–11: here are verses 5–8 in the NRSV translation:

⁵Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,
⁶who, though he was in the form of God,
 did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited,
⁷but emptied himself,
 taking the form of a slave,
 being born in human likeness.
 And being found in human form,
⁸he humbled himself
 and became obedient to the point of death –
 even death on a cross.

¹⁰ Hasker, *Metaphysics and the Tri-Personal God*, 246–54.

In Tuggy's reading, "form of God" and "equality with God" refer to the same thing, but nothing metaphysical is intended; rather, the two phrases refer to Jesus' "godly character." But can a mere human possess a moral character that makes him "equal with God"? And how, we may ask, is "godly character" the sort of thing that might be "exploited"? Jesus could hardly "empty himself" of his godly character. Tuggy supposes that in emptying himself Jesus "lays aside the privilege he has because of his special standing with God." But this is not stated, or clearly implied, in the text itself. And whatever those privileges may have been, they could hardly have made him equal with God.

In any case, the text clearly speaks of a *two-stage* renunciation on Jesus' part (he "emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness" [the first stage], and "he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death" [the second stage]). Tuggy recognizes this, and proposes that the earlier stage be found in Jesus' acceptance, in the garden of Gethsemane, that events should be allowed to proceed without the divine intervention that could have saved him from the suffering that was to come. Surely, however, this acceptance was *an integral part* of his obedience unto death; it is not a plausible reading of the "emptying" mentioned in v. 7. In effect, Tuggy collapses the two-stage renunciation into one. I submit that the traditional interpretation, in which the "emptying" is understood to be the incarnation of the pre-existent Son, is considerably more plausible than Tuggy's reading.¹¹

It is worth pointing out that Tuggy, when pressed, is prone to insist that he can concede Jesus' pre-existence, personal involvement in the creation of the universe, and so on, so long as this is not taken to imply Jesus' divinity. Take his flippant remark in the present paper, "Do you think some New Testament passage teaches Jesus's 'pre-existence'? I'll remind you that he's clearly presented as a real man, a descendent of David, but for the purpose of this argument, I can grant that Jesus existed before the world was created. That would make him really old!" (165) That's wrong; Tuggy cannot afford to grant anything of the sort. To be sure, such a concession would be consistent with Tuggy's broad definition of 'unitarian,' but it is not in any way consistent with Tuggy's own unitarian view. Tuggy no more believes that any human being is pre-existent in this way than I do. If Jesus is indeed pre-existent, Tuggy's unitarianism is false.¹²

The other passage to be noted here is John 1:1–18. A brief overview will bring out the reasons why this is an especially challenging passage for unitarians.

"In the beginning was the Word" — The Word itself has no beginning; it has been always.

"The Word was with God" — (*pros ton theon*) Therefore, the Word is distinct from God.

"The Word was God" — That is to say, the Word was divine.¹³

"All things came into being through him" — The Word was the Creator.

So far, we have some impressive metaphysics, but little to go on concerning what, or who, the Word *is*. But now, this begins to change.

"In him was life, and the life was the light of all people"¹⁴ — The Word is a living being, and an enlightener.

"John . . . came as a witness to testify to the light . . . He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light" — We know, from vv. 19ff, who it was that was the subject of John's testimony. This was Jesus, who is indeed the light, who therefore is the Word with whom both this passage and the entire world began.

"And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory" — The climax of the passage; the rest of the gospel is written so that we, also, may see Christ's glory.

11 For a more complete statement of Tuggy's view of this text, see Dale Tuggy, "a reading of Philippians 2:5–11", <https://trinities.org/blog/a-reading-of-philippians-25-11/>.

12 Tuggy has stated, "If I'm right about g=f and was convinced that you're right about NT 'high christology,' I would just be an Origen or Clarke type subordinationist unitarian, who thinks that g=f and has the s and h as lesser divine beings which eternally exist and have their levels of divinity ultimately because of g" (from an email).

13 New Testament scholar Marianne Meye Thompson writes, "god' (*theos*) is not a proper name, but a term that makes a predication about the person or reality so named" (Marianne M. Thompson, *The God of the Gospel of John* (Edermans, 2001), 22–23, emphasis in original).

14 This connects *ho gegonen* with the rest of v. 3. This fits the context better than connecting it with v. 4; in what follows "light" clearly means the Word, not what the Word has created. Tuggy, I think, would agree with this.

“No one has ever seen God.” It is *monogenēs*¹⁵ *theos* — literally “the only-begotten one, God” — who has revealed him. The NRSV translation is wonderful: “It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father’s heart, who has made him known.”

This passage presents severe challenges to Tuggy, or any other unitarian interpreter. The Word is distinct from God, yet the Word is the divine Creator. Furthermore, the Word is the same as Jesus; the text affords no opening into which a distinction between the two could be inserted. Tuggy insists that, even in passages that “seem to” imply pre-existence, the New Testament never states that Jesus has always existed — but 1:1 says precisely that. (Another strong candidate is John 8:58: “before Abraham was, I am.”) The text is not explicitly trinitarian; there is no mention here of the Spirit, and no term such as ‘trinity’ for referring to Father, Son, and Spirit together. But the text was unquestionably central among those New Testament passages that provided the impetus for the development of trinitarian doctrine.

As we would expect, Tuggy’s take on the passage is far different from the straightforward reading given above.¹⁶ He states, “In my view the author (‘God was the Word’) is warning us that really God is the only agent here, despite the personification of the Word in this passage. It’s ‘with’ God — like Wisdom in Prov 8 — but really, it just is him. Unlike Justin and company, he doesn’t think that God has to create through an intermediary being.” So in fact there *is no* Word distinct from God; the sentence, ‘God was the Word,’ is an identity statement which contradicts, and in so doing corrects, the erroneous statements (if taken literally) which immediately precede and follow it. In order to understand the passage, we need to read it as *correcting* some earlier form of Logos-theology that had currency among his Christian readers. Furthermore, that the Word is the same person as Jesus is, according to Tuggy, an erroneous “assumption, popularized by the Logos theorists.” “Jesus is directly in view only starting in v. 14.” “What makes the passage confusing to us is the look-ahead that mentions John the Baptist (vs. 6–9). The author is eager to show Jesus as greater, and interrupts his account of the Word’s career to mention John. The way this author looks at it, Jesus’s career is the latest and greatest stage of the Word’s ‘career’ — which is why vs. 9–13 sound Jesus-y, even though Jesus comes on the stage in v. 14.”

This interpretation seems to me to be forced and implausible. The assumed background of an earlier Christian¹⁷ Logos theory (for which independent evidence is lacking) is essential to the understanding of the passage, which without that background is self-contradictory. This in turn means that the passage remains incomprehensible for pretty much everyone since the (imagined) first readers. Christians who believe the author was providentially directed to write for the edification of the Church will find this problematic. The effort to cut the tie between the Word and Jesus is labored and unconvincing. Verses 9–13 don’t just “sound Jesus-y”; they are *about Jesus*, the *only* person to whom John bore witness. And it was *Jesus himself* about whom John spoke; not about some nebulous, abstract, “light.” (Whatever else we can say about John the Baptist, he was not the “philosopher in the wilderness.”) It is Jesus who in the text is *identified as* the light, which takes us back to verses 4 and 5, and seals the identification of Jesus and the Word. The identification between them is not an “assumption” from the Logos theorists; it is what

15 *monogenēs* is controversial; this is the same word that occurs in John 3:16 (“God’s only-begotten Son”). Some have argued that no reference to “begetting” is present; the word just means “only.” But the occurrence in 1:18 argues against this: *monogenēs* must distinguish *theos* who is the revealer from the unseen *theos* at the beginning of the verse; and “only” does not serve this purpose well.

16 The summary of Tuggy’s view of this passage is taken from two podcasts: Dale Tuggy, “podcast 291 — From one God to two gods to three “Gods” — John 1 and early Christian theologies”, <https://trinities.org/blog/podcast-291-from-one-god-to-two-gods-to-three-gods-john-1-and-early-christian-theologies/>; and Daniel Boyarin, “podcast 301 — Dr. Daniel Boyarin on John 1”, <https://trinities.org/blog/podcast-301-dr-daniel-boyarin-on-john-1/>, as well as material from an email dated September 10, 2020.

17 It would have to have been Christian (at least, to have a considerable Christian following) to be sufficiently important to call the for sort of warning that is in view on this interpretation.

the text clearly implies. Or so I say; I believe Tuggy's interpretation will be credible only to those who are strongly motivated to avoid the damaging implications of the passage for unitarianism.^{18,19}

IV. THE VERDICT OF HISTORY?

It seems to me that Tuggy is bound to be disappointed at the relative failure of unitarianism in the history of Christianity. As noted previously, a human-only view of Jesus failed to make much headway in the ancient Church, and while it has reappeared from time to time within Protestantism it has failed to make an impression comparable to that of the major Christian movements. Sometimes this may have been due to official persecution, but not always. In the Roman Empire Arianism was at times forcibly suppressed, but human-only unitarianism was not enough of a problem to need suppressing. There was persecution of Socinians in the Reformation period, but more recently Unitarians in Great Britain and America (for example) have been free to practice and promulgate their faith, with quite limited results. Ironically, the most sustained success (or semi-success) for unitarian views has come in a quarter for which Tuggy and his fellow "biblical unitarians" have little sympathy, the movement of liberal Protestant theology beginning roughly with Kant and Schleiermacher.

When I mentioned this to Tuggy, he replied that it sounded like an argument against unitarianism from divine providence. Actually I had not intended it as such, but he may have a point. However, I am not especially inclined to attribute the limited success of unitarian views to God's withholding his blessings from those who espouse them. It seems more likely that a great many Christians simply have not found this theology to be spiritually satisfying. And I am among them: I sometimes pray to Jesus, and it is important for me that Jesus actually is aware of those prayers, and those of millions of other Christians who do likewise — something impossible for the mind and brain of a person who is human and nothing more.²⁰

Providential considerations do come into play as we consider the role of Scripture in this controversy. The God of open theism — a God in whom both Tuggy and I believe — would surely have anticipated the reaction of a great many believers to the New Testament depictions of Jesus. God would have known that most Christians would not follow the sophisticated, deflationary readings of New Testament texts that are required to bring them into line with unitarian assumptions. And while the Father authorizes and encourages the exaltation of Jesus, he would not have been favorable to the metaphysical confusion that (from a unitarian point of view) has led mainstream Christianity to subvert the monotheism that the Jews learned in so many hard lessons. One would expect, then, that divine wisdom would have restrained some of the "excess enthusiasm" of the New Testament writers that has had the result of leading so many astray. To be sure, it is hazardous for us to presume to penetrate the wisdom of divine providence — but these thoughts do occur to one.

Truth in theology is not determined by majority opinion, and even long-held errors can sometimes be reversed. In order to accomplish this in the present case, the Holy Spirit would need to "turn around his game" and come back from a *very* long losing streak! But amazing things can and sometimes do hap-

18 It seems to me that there is also a problem of literary coherence with Tuggy's interpretation. Undoubtedly it is possible to carry on at some length with a personification, even when one acknowledges that the personified entity is fictional. But is it plausible that someone would do this, and *in the immediate context* include also an explicit statement ("the Word was (identical with) God") that undermines the personification? So that, in v. 14, it is simply *God* who becomes incarnate in Jesus? I find it quite difficult to read the text keeping these assumptions in mind.

19 Tuggy has stated that in the near future he will be publishing a major article setting out and defending his interpretation of this text.

20 In reply, Tuggy states, "most unitarian Christians like me sometimes pray to Jesus too, and we think he can hear and respond. We think that when he was raised and exalted, God must have empowered him to do what his job is now to do!" Point taken. This empowerment must have involved a rather extreme amplification of Jesus' mental powers; no human brain and mind could possibly accomplish this task. We might wonder: how extensive could such changes be, while the person still remains a human being? But I won't pursue that question here.

pen. Unless and until this occurs, the vast majority of Christians will continue to offer divine worship to the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit — that is, to the Trinity.²¹

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²¹ My thanks to John Sanders and Dale Tuggy for valuable comments on an earlier version of these remarks.

